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## LABOR OF LOVE

something done out of affection or great interest

1. Martha loves to knit sweaters for her children. She could buy them for less money than it costs her to make them, but they are a *labor of love* for her.
2. When Ralph built a wagon for his son, he picked out the wood himself, carefully sanded each piece, and handpainted it with more coats of paint than necessary. Building the wagon was a *labor of love* because it was for his son.

## LAME DUCK

a person who holds an office but has little real influence because he or she has not been reelected

1. After an election, a *lame duck* congress often gets a lot of serious work done because the members who have been voted out are no longer running for office and no longer have to worry about pleasing their constituents.
2. The board of directors chose a new chairman to take over running the company. The old chairman had a few weeks left before he had to step aside, but his workers no longer feared him because he was a *lame duck*.

The expression suggests that a lame duck—a duck that cannot fly—is ineffectual. It originally comes from the 1760s London Stock Market, where it referred to investors who were unable to pay their debts.

## LAP OF LUXURY, LIVE IN THE

to be very comfortable because one is well-off financially

1. Because she was the richest movie star in the business, she had a magnificent house, servants, cars and clothes. She was *living in the lap of luxury*.
2. If this business deal succeeds, we'll never have to worry about money again. *We'll be living in the lap of luxury*.

The *lap of luxury* means a very comfortable life because one is rich, whereas the *life of Riley* is an easygoing life because one doesn't have to work or isn't working. Someone who is poor can lead the *life of Riley* if he or she doesn't mind being poor.

## LAST BUT NOT LEAST

the final item on a list, but not the least important

1. If you want to borrow my car, you have to follow the rules. First, you must obey the speed limit, fill up the gas tank before you bring it back, and bring it back before I need it tomorrow. *Last but not least*, you may not drive it if you have been drinking alcohol.

2. John accomplished a lot in his lifetime. He was a teacher and an activist for the poor, he wrote several books, and *last but not least*, he raised four successful children.

The expression is used before the last in a series of items to indicate that it is not less important for being last. Usually the series has been randomly arranged and no specific order of importance has been assigned to the items.

## LAST-DITCH EFFORT

a very strenuous final attempt

1. I'm going to try a *last-ditch effort* to uproot this old oak tree myself before I call the tree company to come and do it by machine.
2. Ronnie slipped and fell as he ran to catch the baseball, but when he looked up, the ball was still sailing through the air. Ronnie got up and made a *last-ditch effort* to catch the ball.

The expression often conveys a sense of great physical effort and is usually used when the outcome is likely to be unsuccessful.

## LAST/FINAL STRAW

the final thing; the thing or action that is too much or goes too far

1. Constance finally quit her job because the boss asked her to make the coffee and act as a hostess, even though she was hired as an accountant. The *last straw* came when the boss asked her to go out and buy his family's Christmas presents and then complained because she couldn't get her work done.
2. First the builder dropped paint on their new carpet, then he backed his ladder through their window. When he backed his truck over their prized flowerbed, it was the *final straw*, and they told him not to come back.

Synonym: *straw that broke the camel's back*

Both expressions suggest the idea of loading straw (a relatively light material) onto a camel's back until one final light straw (the last straw) breaks the camel's back.

## LAUGH ALL THE WAY TO THE BANK

to be proved right or successful in the face of scorn, particularly as regards money

1. No one wanted to invest in Paul's scheme to make money, because they thought it sounded crazy. When it worked, he *laughed all the way to the bank*.
2. People think Mrs. Walker is silly to save money now for her retirement, but she'll *laugh all the way to the bank* when she has a comfortable lifestyle later.

Compare to: *have the last laugh*

The expression suggests that the person who triumphs enjoys laughing at those who doubted him while he takes the fruits of his success (money) to the bank. He will be the rich one.

## LAY AN EGG

to do something embarrassing

1. I really *laid an egg* when I asked that elderly woman how old she was. I was just curious, but I should have known it was the wrong thing to do.
2. Everyone stopped talking and looked at the young man in disbelief when he asked Mr. Thomas about his salary. The young man had really *laid an egg*.

Compare to: *bomb*

Whereas *bomb* is usually applied to creative activities (e.g., a play, a book, a movie, an idea) that fail on a grand scale, *lay an egg* is usually applied to something that is socially embarrassing on a small scale.

## LAY DOWN THE LAW

to set rules and regulations

1. The boss had noticed that the employees frequently took more time than they were allowed for lunch and coffee breaks. The boss knew he had to put a stop to it, so he called a meeting and *laid down the law*.
2. The teacher decided that he would no longer tolerate late homework, coming late to class, or chatting during class. When the students were all in their seats, he *laid down the law*.

Synonyms: *put (one's) foot down*.

*Read (someone) the riot act* implies more noisy anger against a past action than *lay down the law*, which implies stern instruction governing future behavior.

## LAY (ONE'S) CARDS ON THE TABLE

to be open and honest; to reveal everything

1. They didn't understand what Mr. Palmer's plan would lead to or why he was trying to involve them, so finally they asked him to *lay his cards on the table*.
2. When the boss had been strangely quiet for several weeks, the workers knew that something must have been going on. One day she called a meeting and told them that now she could *lay her cards on the table*.

The expression originates from the idea of a card game in which one must reveal one's cards by laying them on the table.

## LEAD (SOMEONE) AROUND BY THE NOSE

to dominate someone; to force someone to do something

1. The department chairman runs the department, and no one else has any say in how things are done. He *leads everyone by the nose*.
2. The students seem to be in control of what's going on in the classroom. They *lead the teacher around by the nose*.

## LEARN THE ROPES

to become familiar with a task or situation

1. The bank manager told the new trainee to keep his eyes open and watch what the other tellers did until he *learned the ropes*.
2. I'm willing to work long hours and I'll work for free. I'm anxious to *learn the ropes* of this business.

Synonym: *learn the ins and outs*

Compare to: *know the ropes*

These expressions are similar, but take place at different times. Before one *knows the ropes*, one *learns the ropes*.

## LEAVE NO STONE UNTURNED

to search everywhere

1. The boss called the employees together for a meeting. He said he didn't know who was stealing from the company, but that he would *leave no stone unturned* until he found out who it was.
2. The police looked everywhere for the prisoner who had escaped. They *left no stone unturned*, but they were unable to find him.

Synonym: *beat the bushes*

The expression suggests that whatever one is searching for might be under a stone, and that one will search so thoroughly as to turn over every stone looking for it.

## LEAVE (SOMEONE) [GET LEFT IN] THE LURCH

to abandon someone to a difficult situation, forcing him or her to take all the responsibility

1. The builder hired several carpenters and electricians to work on the building, but he *left them in the lurch* when it came time to pay them.
2. The company went bankrupt and the stockholders got *left in the lurch*. They had to pay all the outstanding bills.
3. Where were you at four o'clock? I thought you were going to attend the meeting and help us with the difficult decisions that needed to be made. You shouldn't have *left us in the lurch* like that.

Synonym: *leave (someone) high and dry*

## LEAVE (SOMEONE)/GET LEFT OUT IN THE COLD

to shun someone; to exclude someone from a place or activity

1. Mary seemed not to care for anyone else's feelings, and managed to offend just about everyone. Eventually she got *left out in the cold* and no one included her in their plans or parties.
2. I don't know what I did wrong, but I'd like to make up for it. Please don't *leave me out in the cold*.

The expression suggests that when a person is excluded from the group or mainstream, he or she is outside, where it is cold.

## LEAVE (SOMEONE) HIGH AND DRY

abandoned or stranded; helpless

1. Bob got a ride to the party with his friends, but they left without him and he had no way to get home. They *left him high and dry*.
2. When you buy a package vacation trip through a travel agency, be sure that it is a company that has a good reputation. Too many companies have gone out of business, leaving those who have already paid their money *high and dry*.

Synonyms: *leave (someone) in the lurch*

Similar to: *leave (someone) holding the bag*

The expression probably originates from the idea of a ship stranded on high ground, leaving it out of water (dry).

## LEAVE (SOMEONE) HOLDING THE BAG

to leave somebody with unwanted responsibility

1. If I invest my money with you and things go badly, I want to make sure you're going to take responsibility. I don't want you to *leave me holding the bag*.
2. Laura took a risk and it failed, and she was *left holding the bag*.

Similar to: *leave (someone) in the lurch*, *leave (someone) high and dry*.

## LEAVE WELL ENOUGH ALONE

to accept a situation as it is; to avoid trying to improve a situation one's actions might make it worse

1. Her work isn't perfect, but your criticism might just make the situation worse. I recommend that you *leave well enough alone*.
2. I'm a perfectionist, so I can never *leave well enough alone*. Sometimes that is okay, but sometimes it causes me nothing but trouble.

Synonym: *let sleeping dogs lie*

## LEND/GIVE (SOMEONE) AN/(ONE'S) EAR

to listen to someone

1. The boss walked into the coffee room where we were chatting and asked us to *lend him an ear*. He wanted us to listen to what he had to say.
2. All the children pulled on the teacher's skirt, begging to hear the news. She finally told them that if they *gave her an ear*, she would tell them what they wanted to hear.

Dating from at least the 1600s, this phrase has consistently meant to listen to or ask someone to listen. It became especially popular after William Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*, in which Mark Antony says to a noisy crowd, 'Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears' in order to get them to quiet down and listen.

## LET SLEEPING DOGS LIE

to not look for trouble or stir up a troublesome situation

1. The situation seems to have resolved itself, and I'm not going to bring it up again. I'm going to *let sleeping dogs lie*.
2. The politician resigned his office before his colleagues could bring charges of misconduct against him. After that, they *let sleeping dogs lie* and didn't pursue the matter.

Synonym: *leave well enough alone*

The expression is from a proverb dating back to the 13th century and suggests the threat of attack to one who frightens a dog by suddenly waking it from its sleep.

## LET THE CAT OUT OF THE BAG

to reveal a secret

1. When Rachel decided she was going to quit her job, she told her best friend but she didn't want to *let the cat out of the bag*. Rachel told her friend not to tell anyone.
2. The children put their money together to buy their mother a birthday present, but the youngest child became excited and couldn't keep from telling his mother what they had bought. His brothers and sisters told him he shouldn't have *let the cat out of the bag*.

Synonym: *spill the beans*

Antonym: *keep (something) under (one's) hat*

Centuries ago, merchants would sell piglets in bags. If a dishonest merchant placed a cat in the bag instead of the more costly and valuable piglet, the buyer might not know until they opened the bag and *let the cat out*.

## LETTER PERFECT

exactly right

1. The boss was always happy with Meg's typing because it was *letter perfect*.
2. The actor practiced his lines over and over so that he wouldn't make any mistakes on stage. He wanted to get his lines *letter perfect*.

The expression is used only in reference to writing or speech.

## LIFE OF RILEY

the good life; a comfortable life

1. When Henry retires, he plans to live the *life of Riley*. He won't have to work and he'll be able to putter around the garden every day.
2. Mrs. Hartley lived the *life of Riley* until her husband died and she had to take on two jobs to support herself.

Similar to: *lap of luxury*

*The lap of luxury* means a very comfortable life because one is rich, whereas *the life of Riley* is an easy-going life because one doesn't have to work or isn't working. Someone who is poor can lead *the life of Riley* if he or she doesn't mind being poor. The expression *the life of Riley* seems to originate from a song that was popular in the 1880s. It was a comic song called "Is That Mr. Reilly?" written by Pat Rooney, and it described what Mr. Reilly would do if he suddenly became rich.

### LIKE WATER OFF A DUCK'S BACK

having no effect on someone

1. Patricia never takes criticism personally. She accepts it and doesn't feel hurt—it's like *water off a duck's back*.
2. When I told my husband that the storm had ripped off a large part of our roof, the news was like *water off a duck's back*. He said, "It could have been worse."

Similar to: *roll with the punches*; *take (something) in stride*

The expression suggests that something has no effect in the same way that water rolls off a duck's back, not penetrating the bird's feathers.

### LION'S SHARE, THE

the greater part; most

1. The children ate *the lion's share* of the ice cream. They left only a few spoonfuls for their parents.
2. The son inherited *the lion's share* of his father's estate when the old man died. The other relatives in the family got practically nothing.

The expression suggests that the amount of food that a lion would take for itself would be the greatest portion.

### LIVE AND LET LIVE

to live without interference from other; to not interfere with the lives of others

1. They were very good neighbors because they never complained or worried about how other people looked after their houses. Their attitude was *live and let live*.
2. Don't tell me how to run my life and I won't tell you how to run yours. Let's *live and let live*.

### LOCK, STOCK, AND BARREL

everything; the entirety

1. When the farmer moved away, he sold his land, his farmhouse, his livestock and all his equipment. He sold everything *lock, stock, and barrel*.
2. The shop owner arrived at his shop one morning to find that thieves had stolen all his merchandise. They had cleaned him out *lock, stock, and barrel*.

Synonym: *whole kit and caboodle*

Compare to: *go whole hog*; *hook, line, and sinker*; *whole nine yards*

### LONG AND SHORT OF IT, THE

the outcome; the point

1. I don't have a lot of time, so please don't go into all the details of the story. What's *the long and short of it*?
2. The assistant manager told the boss that he felt unappreciated and underpaid, that nobody respected him, and that nobody listened to his ideas. Finally he said, "*The long and short of it* is that I'm going to find another job."

Compare to: *bottom line*; *nitty gritty*; *make a long story short*

### LONG SHOT

an attempt at something that has only a small chance of being successful

1. The newspaper reporter didn't know where the actor was staying. It was a *long shot*, but he guessed that it would be a hotel near the movie studio. He found the actor at the second hotel he called.
2. When they found a house that they really wanted to buy, they called the owners, but found out that they were not interested in selling. It had been a *long shot*, so they weren't too disappointed.

### LOOK A GIFT HORSE IN THE MOUTH, NOT

to find fault with a gift or to refuse a gift, usually because one is suspicious of the giver's motives

1. You are too suspicious of Greg's motives. If I were you, I would accept his gift graciously. *Don't look a gift horse in the mouth*.
2. Johanna said that she appreciated their thoughtfulness in giving her a new car, and that she didn't want to *look a gift horse in the mouth*, but she really would prefer a model with a few more extra features like air-conditioning and a CD player.

*Don't look a gift horse in the mouth* is often used to tell someone that he is being overly suspicious of the giver's motives or overly critical of the gift. The expression originates from the practice of checking the age of a horse by inspecting its teeth. If a person received a horse as a gift and then checked its teeth to see how old it was, this would be seen by the giver as greedy and ungrateful.

### LOOK DOWN (ONE'S) NOSE AT (SOMEONE/ SOMETHING)

to be snobbish about someone or something

1. The well-off people in this city *look down their noses* at taking public transportation. They only take taxis.
2. The girl's parents would not let her marry the young man because he was from a lower social class. They *looked down their noses* at him.

The expression suggests that one person is on a higher (social) level and must look down his nose in order to see the person or thing on the lower level.

## LOOK/FEEL LIKE DEATH WARMED OVER

to look/feel ill or exhausted

1. Sue *looked like death warmed over* when we went to see her in the hospital after her surgery.
2. I stayed up for three nights straight studying for my philosophy exam and now I *feel like death warmed over*.

The expression suggests how a person would look or feel if he or she were warmed up after dying, i.e., still dead.

## LOOK LIKE THE CAT THAT SWALLOWED THE CANARY

to have a knowing and self-satisfied smile on one's face; to be pleased with oneself, often because one has done something which one knows was wrong but which was very enjoyable

1. The clever businessman had just completed a very profitable deal for a very good price, and he was very pleased with himself. He *looked like the cat that swallowed the canary*.
2. When the teacher came into the classroom, the students sat there *looking like cats that swallowed the canaries*. The teacher knew the students must be planning something mischievous.

Canaries are songbirds that people keep as pets in cages. A cat that had swallowed a canary would be pleased with itself but also know that it would be in trouble when the master of the house came home and discovered what had happened.

## LOOK SHARP

to have a neat and orderly appearance (sentence 1) or to have a stylish appearance (sentence 2)

1. The army drill sergeant shouted at his troops to stand straight, pull in their stomachs, put their heads up and pull their shoulders back. Then he yelled, "*Look sharp.*"
2. The boss used to be a pretty sloppy dresser, but now he wore stylish slacks, silk ties, nice shoes, and top-quality jackets. He really *looked sharp*.

## LOSE (ONE'S) COOL

to become angry

1. When another soccer player tripped Mary and the referee didn't notice, Mary *lost her cool* and shoved the other girl back.
2. I know you think Tom stole your idea, but you can't lose your temper in this meeting. Don't *lose your cool*.

Synonym: *lose (one's) temper*

Antonym: *keep one's cool*

## LOSE/HOLD (ONE'S) TEMPER

to become suddenly angry. To hold one's temper means to remain calm when irritated.

1. The children's mother was tired of asking them to pick up their toys. Finally, she *lost her temper* and yelled at them.
2. Joel was a calm and quiet person who never became visibly angry. Even when pushed, he was always able to *hold his temper*.

Synonym: *lose/keep (one's) cool*

Compare to: *blow (one's) stack; fly off the handle; see red; hot under the collar*

## LOW MAN ON THE TOTEM POLE

the person of lowest rank

1. Sheila eventually wanted to become a manager, but since she had just joined the company, she would have to be *low man on the totem pole* for now.
2. Chris was happy when he finally got a promotion in the company. He was no longer *low man on the totem pole*.

The expression originates from the totem poles of some tribes of Native Americans. They were wooden statues made of tree trunks, which consisted of several carved heads, one on top of the other. The expression is usually used to describe the hierarchy in a business, club or office rather than a social or family setting. Even when the expression refers to a female, the expression is still *low man on the totem pole*.

## LUCKY DOG/STIFF

a lucky person

1. They got to the airport late and, because there were no more economy seats left, they got to sit in first class for no extra charge. They sure were *lucky dogs*.
2. Carl has relatives who own a car dealership, so he always gets a good deal when he buys a new car. He's a *lucky stiff*.

This slang expression is used between friendly equals.